

PORTER ROBERS
AN INDUSTRY FOR THE BLIND

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AN INDUSTRY FOR THE BLIND

PORTER ROGERS*

Industrial Home for the Blind, Chicago

PERHAPS the happiest group of blind people to be found anywhere in this country are those residing in the Illinois Industrial Home for the Blind, at 19th street and Marshall boulevard, Chicago. Cheerfulness and contentment are the keynotes of their daily life. True, their location and environment is ideal for their convenience and their needs. Governor Small, Judge C. H. Jenkins, director of the Department of Public Welfare, have given every consideration to our comfort and well-being. And in this respect they have been ably seconded by our present Managing Officer, Thomas H. Devenish, who has made this a really model institution of its kind in the United States. Other states have good homes but ours, we feel sure, is the best.

But there is another element contributing to our happiness other than that of comfort and pleasant environment, and that element is employment. That "to be busy is to be happy" is agreed by all moralists and psychologists. And the truth of this axiom is beautifully exemplified in the lives of the blind in this home—for we are kept sufficiently busy to prevent life

from growing monotonous and the days becoming irksome and dull.

During the busy season when the wholesalers of hardwares throughout the Middle West are taking in stock in anticipation of a heavy demand for builders' hardware, visitors to the home are surprised to find the place such a veritable hive of industry. Grouped about tables in various rooms are to be found blind men and women working ceaselessly, with deft and flying fingers, at their agreeable task of wrapping screws. Approaching one of such groups you are sure to find the members laughing or engaged in pleasant conversation but busy, always busy, with a steadfastness of purpose that might well point a moral to those vastly better paid for their labor. On the long table about which the workers are gathered is to be seen before each a large tin box, or other receptacle, filled to its brim with shining screws. From this container a few handfuls of screws are placed on the table to one side of the worker, while conveniently on the other, is placed a bundle of paper, craft tissue, in which the screws are to be wrapped. A sheet of this paper is grasped deftly in one hand and placed on the table in front

*Mr. Rogers is blind and is a resident at the Home.

of the worker while with the other hand the screws are quickly placed in position, the paper given a proper fold at one end, a quick roll, and the free end of the paper is tightly twisted. The resulting neat package of two, four, or six screws, as may be required, is dropped into another receptacle and the operation again repeated *ad infinitum*. A clean, wholesome, simple employment at which most all can work and earn for themselves a measure of competence. And it is surprising to what a degree of skill, speed and accuracy many of these sightless workers have attained.

The question foremost on the lips of visitors is, "For whom are you working and what use do you make of these screws?" To this we answer that we are working for the Pason Manufacturing company, manufacturers of builders' hardware, etc. The screws are to be used in the building trade. The screws are delivered in trucks in fifty pound sacks, from two to three thousand pounds at each delivery. Usually there are several varieties of screws in each lot. When the bags are delivered they are placed in charge of a partially sighted man in the home, whose duty it is to sort and tag the bags, distribute the screws with the proper color of paper to the workers, to gather the finished work, to keep an account of the amount done by each, make up payrolls, and superintend the work generally.

When a fresh lot of screws has been received and made ready for distribution, the one in charge gives the call through the building, "Get your screws." To this call all the workers respond with alacrity. Though that response may mean many days

of hard, incessant toil (yet, too, it gives interest to our days) and means, prompt and sure, a pay day. This to all is a cheering prospect and a worthy goal. As each worker files in with box or bag to receive his day's work he is told what color of paper is to be used and how many screws are to be placed in the packages. Then they march away, each to his accustomed place, and begin the task of wrapping. From early morning until late at night can be heard the rattle of screws and the soft rustle of tissue paper as the nimble fingers move swiftly at their toil. Placing, rolling, twisting, till the pile of screws is converted into neat packages which are then counted by the workers and placed in bags ready for packing at the factory. Visitors seeing a half dozen blind persons at a table, each working with a different color of paper, wonder how they keep from getting their colors mixed. Only just by being careful can this be done, though some who have a finer sense of touch can often tell the color of the paper by its distinctive texture. The necessity for care in keeping the colors separate can be best understood when I say that the brass screws are always wrapped in white paper, the nickle, in blue, the sandblast, in purple or brown, bronze in red, etc. For these screws must match with the locks, hinges, hooks and other hardware for which they are intended. At the factory the packages are packed in cartons and shipped with the assignment of hardware they match. There is also another kind of package containing both large and small screws to be used on transoms which are wrapped in heavy paper and tied

with twine. All the work is piece work and pays so much per one hundred packages. We each keep account of our own work but at the factory the screws are counted by weight, so many packages to a pound, varying with the material used.

But what is most interesting about this work is the story of how we came to get it and the great change it has wrought in the lives of the workers. The Pason company had always found it a troublesome problem to get their screws wrapped. At first the work was given out in small lots to the children of their employees to be wrapped as home work. Obviously, they could not pay much for this class of work. The work done by the children was very unsatisfactory and the Child Labor law put an end to it. Then old people were hired but could not turn out the work rapidly enough. Then girls were employed at so much per week, but could not or would not attain sufficient speed for accuracy to make that method a paying one. Having a blind man working in their plant and doing good work, the idea came to Mr. Billings, head of the firm, that perhaps blind people could do the work wanted, and so he bethought himself of the Home for the Blind only a short distance away.

Fortunately for us our managing officer at that time was Mr. O. A. Elliott of Springfield, a progressive, far-sighted man of kindly ways, and with the interest of the blind much at heart. It was to him that the proposition of doing the screw-wrapping by the blind was broached, and at once made its appeal.

Mr. Elliott was quick to perceive that some employment and a meas-

ure of financial solvency would greatly better our condition. For, not all could work in the broom factory connected with the home or at other occupations. The dependence upon friends and relatives for the little extras and needs of life or the entire lack of them by those who had no one to look to was a source of discontent and unhappiness. Therefore, the offer of screws came as a light of hope to very many. Mr. Elliott asked some of us what we thought of the proposal, and we were eager to try it. He then asked some of the sighted employees, who had been longer with us than he, for their opinion. They generally discouraged it as being impracticable and inadvisable. But Mr. Elliott was willing to take a sporting chance and said, "We'll have lots of fun trying if we don't make money, but I believe we'll get both." This optimistic prophecy proved most true.

It was an event of real moment to this home when the first small experimental lot of screws arrived on Nov. 2, 1921. Mr. Elliott was the first to learn the simple knack of wrapping from the foreman who brought the first assignment. Then, when all was in readiness for the trial, he selected several of the likeliest prospects, took them into the reception room and started his instructions. Some could do the work within five minutes after their first lesson, while with others it took some time to get the idea, but all achieved the mark so well that we were greatly pleased and Mr. Elliott was delighted. This initial success proved a turning point in the affairs of all engaged in it and ushered in a new era for many who were discouraged and hopeless.

Day after day and far into the evening, with his beloved pipe in his mouth and cheery stories ever ready, Mr. Elliott sat at the tables with us, giving instruction and encouragement and setting an example of industry and a friendly spirit of competition in speed of production. His spirit was infectious, and soon others of the employees got the urge. Screw wrapping became a popular sport about the place. Managing officer, matron and maids, book-keeper, engineer, janitor all bore a hand during their leisure moments. The rivalry for speed and neatness was keen and merry. Even visitors would join in and friendly policemen, off duty, would drop in and take a hand. While Mr. Elliott was in charge, Mr. Wirth, also of Springfield, superintendent of the painting of the home, acted as general manager and time-keeper. Some of the happiest recollections we have of this home are of those first weeks when we were getting this humble industry on its feet. Then the first trial lot was finished and the factory well pleased with the result, and our first pay day came. Mr. Elliott divided this money equally among the blind who had worked faithfully although we have ever suspected him of robbing his own purse to make the amount large enough to be encouraging, for naturally this was but poorly paid home work. Yet through industry it could be made to yield sufficient for our needs.

After a few weeks of sport and experiment screw wrapping became an established industry and a source of prosperity to many. When Mr. Wirth left at Thanksgiving the work was handed over to John Peardon, a partially sighted inmate, systematized

and regulated, and before Mr. Elliott left us a month later he had succeeded in getting us an advance in the rates paid per one hundred packages and left us happy but regretful. Later on Mr. Devenish got another substantial boost in the pay which further helped our earning power.

Now as to the benefits of this humble but welcome industry. In the first place it is a purely commercial arrangement. No charity whatsoever enters into the bargain. We are paid only for what we do, and we work very hard for meager compensation. The home is at no expense in the matter, and every dollar received is hard earned money, but worked for gladly, for blind people are always willing to work if given an opportunity. We receive on an average of seven cents per hundred packages, and a few of the best workers can average from two to three thousand packages per day, but most of the workers fall far below this figure. From two to six dollars per week may be given as a fair average of earnings. We started with perhaps a dozen workers but at present there are about forty and the work is no longer very steady. The employment is voluntary and the people work when and how they please. With most of the workers it is from early morning until late at night. But in spite of fluctuation and idle periods in these nearly five years of work, the blind have earned many thousands of dollars, thereby filling a great crying need in their lives. But greatest of all is the change it has wrought in the spirit and morale of the home. Many, who before were dependent upon the charity of their relations for clothing and other little extras are now freed

from that humiliation. In truth, the favor is often the other way, while all have a wider field of usefulness than before. In the beginning only the more capable or the very needy took up the work but encouraged by the success of these, others took heart to try, and many a blind man and blind woman who had long felt the misery of being wholly useless and helpless have tried the work and achieved success. Now again they are happy and self-respecting. They no longer need to seek aid from others. I know a case of one young woman, blind from birth, who had always been told that she could do nothing and likely never would, but one week, when on the best paying work, she toiled ceaselessly from early until late, and on pay day was overjoyed to find that she had, unaided, really earned ten dollars all of her own. Many have found renewed health and vigor in work, and no longer pine and worry.

An elderly gentleman, who had long cherished the unfulfilled dream of having an operation on his eye in hope of regaining some sight, toiled and saved

for two years till he had the needed money and then had the great satisfaction of knowing that he had at least had his try even though the result was a failure. Many like instances might be sighted. Many vacations have been taken, many clothes bought, and many pleasures enjoyed that would otherwise have had to be foregone. One girl, who had always longed for a gold watch which ever eluded her bought it with money made from wrapping screws. Some have saved enough for their burial being without life insurance, and so on indefinitely. From abject dependence, most of us can now work and plan and feel some assurance of our hopes and desires being realized.

By finding us employment Mr. Elliott brought a little sunshine into our lives and widened a little the circle of our usefulness. Mr. Devenish has by kind support kept the good work going. Yes, we, too, believe that the surest way to be happy is to be busy, and therefore feel that the past few years have indeed been the happiest days for this home.





THE ORPHANS' HOME HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

THROUGH arrangements with the Department of Registration and Education, A. M. Shelton, director, the school operated in connection with the Soldiers' Orphans' home as a part of that institution is staffed by instructors from the Normal University high school at Normal. Through this arrangement, the children of the Orphans' home are given the latest and the best methods of instruction from the kindergarten through the eighth grades. In addition to this, the arrangement provides for high school courses for the children of the Soldiers' Orphans' home who remain in the institution. It is also extended to those who are placed in homes contiguous to the city of Normal.

W. R. Blackwelder, home visitor, who has been in the service for twenty years, was assigned to the placement and supervision of children of the Soldiers' Orphans' home in January 1920. When he took charge of this work there were but two attending high schools from family homes. This year the number has reached twenty-two, a gradual increase during that time. For the four years preceding January 1920, there has been one graduate each year. The accumulative effect of his efforts in connection

with high school attendance has shown itself in the increased number in high school. It should be remembered that all of these have been placed in homes and the number does not include those who are attending high school from the Orphans' home.

Of the four who have been placed in homes and who are graduating this year, Mr. Blackwelder has this to say:

Pauline Wertin Beekman, graduated May 28, in a class of thirty-nine, Petersburg high school, with an average for four years 95.27. Election to the offices of class president, athletic association treasurer and secretary of the Alumni association recently, is evidence of her popularity. In 1923 she won the medal offered by the local D. A. R. in a contest; later she entered the state contest and won the silver medal for Menard county; subject: "Early Travel and Methods of Transportation in Illinois."

Gwendolyne Ann Thomas came under the supervision of the Soldiers' Orphans' home five years ago. Graduated from the eighth grade in 1922 and entered the Normal university high school the following autumn. Her scholarship is evidenced by the fact that she won second honors for

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Roger, Porter

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